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A Runner’s Triumph over Racism

A symphonic fanfare conducted by Richard Strauss proudly announces the arrival of Adolf Hitler, chancellor of Germany, to the spectators of the XIth Olympiad. For the first time ever a lone runner sprints into the stadium carrying the torch that will light the ever- burning Olympic flame. In alphabetical order forty-nine different countries, the most ever to compete in an Olympics up until that date, march into the stadium. Each athlete is dressed in opening day regalia, and one representative from each country patriotically bears their nation’s flag. Although the topic of Germany’s ban of Jewish athletes from the Olympics is on everyone’s mind, that doesn’t stop seven Jewish and eighteen African American United States participants from competing. One U. S. athlete in particular found glory at the Olympics when he raced to victory, nabbing the most gold medals by any African American in the history of the Games. This great competitor, Jesse Owens, took a stance against the vicious circle of racism surrounding the 1936 Olympics and became a symbol of great honor and admiration not only for African Americans, but those everywhere when he proved to the world that excellence is determined not by the color of an athlete’s skin or the religion they practice, but by their level of commitment and perseverance.

August 1st 1936, a mostly German crowd occupies the Berlin Stadium for the opening ceremony of the Summer Games, eager to convince the world (if untruthfully) that amidst a media storm of criticism over racial discrimination that Germany is a peaceful, tolerant country and that its athletes are among the finest in the world. While their endeavor will ultimately be successful thanks to a bucket load of German propaganda and a massive cover-up of anti- Jewish promotional materials, it is the efforts of the athletes in particular to triumph against racial discrimination that remains to this day the real reason these Olympic Games are still famous. Even though they were pressured to boycott the Games, Jewish athletes from around the world showcased enormous courage not only by competing, but by winning nine total medals at the event. The Jewish were not the only consistently alienated group whose competitors found success at the Olympics. Though still widely discriminated against even after the death of slavery, many African Americans found they were granted more freedom and acceptance in Europe than they had back home in the United States. But, it was one special African American athlete, Jesse Owens, the grandson of former slaves, who achieved at the Games what no previous Olympian ever had. A record holder both during his high school career and his time at Ohio State University in track and field, he was posed to become the world’s most famous Olympian. At the 1936 Olympics Games he turned out the performance of a lifetime winning gold medals in the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, the long jump, and in the 400-meter relay. Hitler’s theory that the Aryan race was superior in all areas to any other was discredited that day not only by Owens’s stupendous victory, but by the 13 medals won by African American men on the track and field of the 1936 summer Olympics.

News of Owens’s feat soon spread around the world. It was considered a huge success for anti- German supporters who claimed Hitler could not deny the surprising success of the African American athletes on German soil and against his own “superior” athletes. People everywhere began to take notice of and gain respect for African Americans thanks to Jesse Owens. In fact, it was in great part due to Owens that African Americans all across the United States slowly but surely began to gain attention and recognition from their fellow whites; some of whom even supported the movement for increased African Americas rights. If it were not for Owens’s amazing accomplishments in the summer of 1936, segregation may still have played a large part in American history for much longer than it did. Jesse Owens helped open a door in sports and the Olympics for many African Americans to come who would share in his fame and success. After his Olympic win he returned home to work with and mentor unprivileged children not unlike himself. He set an example of excellence and dedication both on and off the track for youths of all races. Jesse Owens, the remarkable athlete and person, inspired millions of people both black and white, and provided a sense motivation to anyone who’s ever faced challenges in achieving their dreams by proving that no matter what, anything you truly believe in is possible.